

 PUTRAJAYA: The refugee exchange deal with Australia was to send a clear message to syndicates that they can no longer rely on easy smuggling through either countries, said Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein. It is already having an impact where there is a reduction in the flow of people. People in crisis-ridden Middle East countries like Libya are now moving out to Europe. They have to face the same consequences and they will be trying to find solutions, he said.

Hishammuddin was referring to the bilateral agreement reached between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and his Australian counterpart Julia Gillard that would see some 800 asylum seekers transferred to Malaysia. Australia in return would resettle 4,000 refugees currently residing in Malaysia over a period of four years.

On a separate issue, Hishammuddin said prison inmates nearing the end of their sentence could soon enjoy a rehabilitation programme to adapt them to the outside world while reducing overcrowding at prisons.

This hinged on the success of a joint Armed Forces and Prisons Department pilot project where 800 inmates were made to do menial tasks at army camps in Kluang and Gemas, he said, adding that the Prime Minister would launch the programme in Gemas on Saturday.

Earlier, in PETALING JAYA, five non-governmental organisations Suaram, Tenaganita, Health Equity Initiatives, Malaysian Social Research Institute and Lawyers for Liberty submitted a memorandum at the Australian High Commission urging the Australian government to withdraw the bilateral agreement with Malaysia.

Suaram refugee coordinator Andika Abdul Wahab said there was no domestic Act to protect refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia and asked the Australian Government to push Malaysia to sign the UN Refugee Convention and the UN Convention against Torture.

The group highlighted Australia's international obligation to refugees as it was a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and UN Refugee 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol.

We are also asking the Australian government to resettle more refugees that go to them not just from Malaysia but the whole South-East Asian region.

Meanwhile, a Bernama report yesterday quoted Australian Immigration Minister Chris Bowen as saying that Australia would finalise the asylum-seeker swap deal with Malaysia in the coming weeks